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## THE GREEK ELEMENT IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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The Epistle to the Hebrews, the stateliest piece of composition in the New Testament, may be compared to a temple whose structure is Greek and whose atmosphere is Christian. One who passes immediately from a careful perusal of the first three gospels to a perusal of Hebrews has at first a feeling as though he had entered a new and strange world of thought. The fatherhood of God which glorifies the words and works of the Master as the sun glorifies an earthly landscape recedes here into the remote background. The Old Testament is given a prominence which quite overshadows the teaching of Jesus, and that too in regard to Jesus himself. The heavens are opened, and we catch a glimpse of the true sanctuary, of which that of Moses was only a shadow, and we see there in the heavenly world the climax of Christ's redeeming activity, which the gospels put on the earth.

When we analyze the difference of conception that marks off the Epistle to the Hebrews from the teaching of Jesus we soon find that its characteristic features are strongly tinged with Greek thought. No other New Testament writing, unless it be the Gospel of John, reveals a Greek influence at once so deep and so pervasive, and no other New Testament writing whatever shows such a blending of Greek thought with the old Hebrew ritual.

If we look through the epistle into the mind of its author to ascertain the starting-point or living center of his views on their Greek side, we are led to his thought of Christ. It was at this point not only that his readers were in danger of falling away from the living God and of surrendering their "confession," that is, their Christian faith, but at this point also that his own deepest personal interest centered. The Greek element in his thought of Christ is the dominant element in all the Greek thought of the epistle. With this element, therefore, it is necessary that our study should begin.

Of the earthly life of Jesus this writing, though it deals with Jesus more or less in each of its thirteen chapters, says little. It makes a passing reference to the fact that the Christian "salvation" was spoken at the first through him (2:3), but never makes a specific reference to the content of his teaching nor alludes to his works of mercy and power. In respect to character it is said that Jesus was "holy" and "guileless" (7:26), but his unselfish love is nowhere mentioned, that is, in the allusions to his earthly life. With the exception of these two passages all the score and more of references to Christ's life on earth touch only its suffering, most of them that last supreme hour of suffering on the cross. His temptation is mentioned, but that was part of his suffering (2:18; 4:15).

Of special interest in view of the author's lofty claims for Christ is the stress which he lays on his human weakness. Thus, with Gethsemane in mind, he says that Jesus offered up prayers and supplications *with strong crying and tears* unto him that was able to deliver him from death, a statement which goes beyond the gospel narrative in its suggestion of infirmity (5:7). Altogether peculiar to this letter is the thought that the sufferings of Jesus were a means of his *perfecting* (2:10; 5:9). This somewhat startling declaration is rendered still more startling by the words that Christ learned *obedience* (5:8), i.e., the perfecting that was achieved through bitter suffering was a perfecting of his own spirit in relation to the will of God and not simply a discipline fitting him to be the leader of other sons of God (5:10).

Such is the background of the life of Jesus against which the epistle sets the glorious picture of the great High Priest. In the creation of this picture Greek thought blends with Jewish, and furnishes the more conspicuous element. Both elements appear in the opening sentence, and each has there about the relative emphasis which is given it elsewhere.

First is the Jewish designation, that one through whom God has spoken at the end of the ages is his "Son" (1:2), and the writer appeals to the Old Testament in support of his use of this title (1:5). This designation is followed by a wealth of interpretative statements such as has not a parallel in the New Testament. First, this Son was appointed "heir of all things," i.e., the possession of the universe with all its riches was to fall to him. From the goal of history the writer

turns back, in the following clause, to its beginning, and asserts that through him whom he has called "Son" God made the ages or the worlds (1:2). Later in the chapter he appears to define this agency of the Son in the creation as the veritable production of the universe, for he applies to him the lofty words which the psalmist addressed to Jehovah,

Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth,  
And the heavens are the work of thy hands (1:10).

He does not regard the Son as the creator in the ultimate sense, that is God (1:2); but God accomplished it, not by his own personal word, as the author of Genesis supposed and as the Old Testament everywhere conceived of the matter, but he accomplished it indirectly through his Son. This thought is shared by Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel.

The writer continues his description of the Son in three clauses, two of which at least concern an eternal relationship. The Son is the refulgence of God's glory, the very image of his substance, and he upholds all things by his powerful word (1:3). Such is the opening affirmation regarding that being through whom God has spoken at the end of the ages. The details of it are not formally repeated elsewhere in the letter, but its glory gives color to a word here and there (1:6, 9), and its thought helps to explain various passages (e.g., 2:9; 7:26; 13:8).

Whence came these exalted claims? Not from the Old Testament anticipations of the Messiah, for these never transcend the limits of a righteous King or a suffering servant who is filled with the Spirit of Jehovah; nor from the Synoptic Gospels, for Jesus said nothing of a relation which he sustained to the universe or the divine nature. It is now widely recognized that this conception of Christ is essentially Greek. To understand it we must go back to Philo and from Philo to the Greek philosophers. What they said of the Logos furnished the writer of Hebrews the materials which, under the influence of the historical Christ, he wrought into his conception. Let us consider its details briefly. The idea that God made the ages or worlds *through* the Son we find in Philo, who says that the cosmos has God as its cause and the Logos as the instrument through whom it was prepared.<sup>1</sup> The Son's heirship to all things follows from this close relation to creation.

<sup>1</sup> *Cherubim* 35.

We may notice here the word of 11:3 about the framing of the worlds. "By faith," says the writer, "we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which appear." Two points are of interest for the present study. The statement that the worlds have been "framed," or set in order, suggests that the writer, if he did not wholly adopt the Platonic view of the eternity of matter, at least did not think of a creation out of nothing. His language leaves the question of the origin of matter untouched. But then, in a subordinate clause, he adds what may at first sight appear to contradict the natural inference from his main statement, that "what is seen hath not been made out of things which appear." But if not out of things "which appear," then, presumably, the writer thought that what is seen had been made out of things which do *not* appear. This inference would at least accord with his use of the word "framed" instead of created. It is favored also by the fact that, in the Greek version of the Old Testament, Gen. 1:2 is rendered, "the earth was unseen and formless," a rendering which seems to show the influence of Greek philosophy; and furthermore, if the thought of the text is that the visible universe was framed out of an unseen and formless mass, it is in line with Philo who, though with some apparent hesitation, regarded the material of the universe as eternal.

Thus the Epistle to the Hebrews, both in its conception of the formation of the universe *through* the Son and in its conception, somewhat vague and questionable, that the origin of the visible universe was not at the same time the creation of the material of which the universe consists, is essentially Greek.

Again, the Son is called the "effulgence" of God's glory, or, if we prefer the less intensive translation of the Greek word, the "refulgence"; that is, we may suppose that the author likened the Son either to the light itself, or, in analogy with Paul's word about the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 4:6), he likened him to a mirror which gives back the light. Now, while this phrase by itself might be regarded as a figurative mode of saying that the *character* of the Son was like the character of God, glorious in holiness and love and patience, yet in view of the obvious sense of the passage as a whole we are doubtless to take it as referring to the essen-

tial being of the Son. In this significant sense it is used by Philo when he calls the human spirit the effulgence of the blessed and thrice blessed nature,<sup>2</sup> and by the author of Wisdom, who calls it an effulgence of the everlasting light (7:26). We are in the same sphere of thought when, in the next clause, the Son is called the "very image" of God's "substance," for Philo calls the Logos the "image of God," the "nearest model of the only Being that truly is."<sup>3</sup> When, finally, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the Son as "upholding all things by the word of his power" (1:3), he is simply stating in a more clearly personal form what the philosopher of Alexandria said of the Logos, that he is the "firmest and most secure support of the universe."<sup>4</sup> The next sentences of the same passage illustrate how much more abstractly Philo sometimes spoke of the Logos than the writer of Hebrews ever spoke of the Son. He says: "This (Logos) being stretched from the center to the ends and from the extremities to the center, runs the long unconquerable race of nature, collecting and binding all the parts. For the Father who begat it made it a bond of the universe that cannot be broken." Thus while the source of our passage is unmistakable, it is equally clear that the Christian writer's conception of the Son was not a little different from the Jewish philosopher's conception of the Logos. And this was of course natural, for while the Greek conception was a philosophical interpretation of the world, the Christian conception was a religious interpretation of Christ. Had Philo come under the personal influence of Jesus, we can easily believe that he would have written of the Logos much as the author of Hebrews did of the Son.

There remains one important christological feature of the Epistle to the Hebrews which we set apart by itself because in its form at least it is altogether Jewish. This is the high-priesthood of Jesus. The author may have been the first Christian, and he may not have been, who thought of Christ as a high priest. The Old Testament gave him a high-priestly ritual and Jesus had shed his blood. But while it was possible to deal symbolically with the blood of Jesus, and while the Old Testament had much to say of an earthly high-priesthood, there was nothing in the one field or the other to suggest a *heavenly*

<sup>2</sup> *De mundi opif.* 33.

<sup>3</sup> *De conj. ling.* 28; *De prof.* 19.

<sup>4</sup> *De plant.* No 2.

high-priesthood and its exercise in a heavenly tabernacle. What the author found in the Scriptures as a basis of his view will be considered later. It will then appear that the Old Testament did not originally suggest to him the conception of Christ as a high priest, but that, the conception having been derived from another source, the Old Testament was made to yield for it a shadowy support. The original suggestion probably came from Alexandria and the Logos doctrine. For Philo thought of the Logos as a high priest, and as exercising his priestly function both in the cosmos and also in the invisible world where he intercedes for mankind before God.<sup>5</sup> When the writer had once fallen in with this conception and had transferred it from the Logos to Christ, he searched his Scriptures for justification, and, as he thought, the search was not in vain. Of his special proof we speak in another connection. It remains to notice the magnitude of the contribution that was made to the thought of Hebrews when Philo's conception of the Logos as a high priest was adopted by the Christian writer. It may not be too much to say that he regarded this thought as the special burden of his message. It is suggested in the opening sentence, clearly stated in the second chapter (2:17), assumed as the basis of exhortation in the third and fourth chapters (3:1; 4:14), and its detailed elaboration fills the central portion of the epistle from chapter five to chapter ten. It colors the author's entire presentation of the work of Christ. Thus he summarized the historical work of Jesus as "making purification of sins" (1:3); he taught that the aim in his being made like unto his brethren was that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17); that his sufferings were designed to qualify him for the exercise of the priestly function (2:10; 5:29); that this function was prophesied in the Old Testament (e.g., 5:5-6, 10); that Jesus was set apart to the office by God with an oath (7:21); that the true tabernacle in heaven is cleansed by his blood (9:23); and that in this heavenly tabernacle he makes intercession forever (7:25). The high priest is the central figure in the epistle, and his priestly service dominates the thought. Thus, as has been pointed out, the chief references to the earthly career of Jesus are the references to his death, and furthermore the conception of God himself appears to be molded in some degree by

<sup>5</sup> *De somn.* 1. 37 ff.

that of the priestly character of Jesus. Thus his sterner attributes are emphasized. He is represented as one who is to be propitiated (2:17), one who visited Israel with judgment (3:17), whose word pierces to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow (4:12); as one into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall (10:31), and as a consuming fire (12:29).

This representation of the character of God and of his relation to men, laying stress as it does on his severity, may be regarded as an evidence that, for the author of Hebrews, the high-priesthood of Jesus was the central Christian doctrine, for his high-priesthood requires just this conception of God as its background.

We pass now to a brief consideration of the debt which the epistle owes to the Platonic doctrine of ideas. It is most probable that the author, before his acceptance of the gospel, had been influenced by this doctrine, but he may well have been reassured of its truth as he applied it in the defense of his favorite tenet. For it is scarcely to be doubted that this tenet, in the form which it assumes in Hebrews, would not have been evolved independently of the Platonic doctrine.

The Scripture ground for the existence of a heavenly tabernacle, as far as any ground is claimed by the author of Hebrews, consists of a single text. When the Lord directed Moses to make a sanctuary, he said: "According to all that I show thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it," and again, referring to the same sacred articles, it is said: "See that thou make them after their pattern, which hath been showed thee in the mount" (Exod. 25:9, 40). This simple statement, which was obviously intended to dignify the tabernacle, was the basis on which the author erected his theory of a greater and more perfect tabernacle in heaven. All that the text directly affirms is that Moses was divinely taught how to make the tabernacle and its furniture. This thought is expressed by the use of the word "pattern." Here it is that Greek speculation enters into our author's view. The "pattern" does not remain a simple pattern which Moses as an architect and builder was to follow in constructing the tabernacle and its furniture, but it becomes a great eternal reality of which the earthly tabernacle could be nothing more than a passing shadow-copy. The "holy place" in the earthly tabernacle is made after the true holy place,



that is, heaven (9:24). This conception plainly has no valid basis in the passage of Exodus which is cited. That merely affords a happy opening by which the Platonic speculation enters our epistle.

But while Exod. 25:40 is the only passage of Scripture which the author brings forward in proof of the doctrine of a heavenly tabernacle and so by implication the doctrine of a heavenly high priest, he evidently saw a further support in the fact that only the high priest might enter the holy place of the tabernacle, and he but once a year, always with an offering of blood. This was for him a divine symbol, teaching that the way into the holy place, that is, the heavenly tabernacle, had not yet been made manifest (9:8). But this ritual of the day of atonement, historically understood, had no such transcendent meaning. Only when considered in the light of Greek philosophy could it be made to yield the immense significance which the author of Hebrews saw in it.

There is another strong feature of the Epistle to the Hebrews which brings us into contact with Greek conceptions, and this is its use of Scripture. In no other writing of the New Testament do we have Greek conceptions of inspiration and interpretation so strikingly illustrated.

There is, first of all, in the author's use of Scripture a wide and deep influence of the doctrine of the Son. When he came to think of Jesus in terms of the Logos-speculation of Philo and the Stoics as the eternal medium between God and the universe, it was natural to think of him as speaking in the prophets. He could not make Christ the actual speaker everywhere. Indeed, there are comparatively few passages in which this was possible. That however is not significant. The momentous fact is that he unhesitatingly ascribes a single passage to Christ.<sup>6</sup> This far-reaching step which was taken by the author of Hebrews we call Greek because it was for him necessarily bound up with the identification of Christ with the Logos.

In thus representing certain passages in the Old Testament as spoken by Christ the author of Hebrews was the first of a long series of interpreters, perhaps not yet ended, who have created unspeakable

<sup>6</sup> Three passages are ascribed to Christ, one in Ps. 22, one in Ps. 40, and one in Isa. 8:1, 8. But Christ is represented as *addressed* in various other passages. See Heb. 1:5, 8, 10-12, 13; 5:5, 6; 7:17, 21.

confusion in regard to the historical sense of the Scriptures. In the case of his successors, as in his own, this error of interpretation has been inseparably bound up with a view of Christ which came not from Christ himself but from Greek philosophy.

Another Greek feature in the author's conception of Scripture—implied rather than expressed—is the passivity of the human agents through whom the teaching is given. The psalmists and prophets whose words are quoted are simply ignored. In the great majority of cases God himself is said to have been the speaker, in two places words of Scripture are cited anonymously, and of three passages Christ is represented as the speaker. When the eighth psalm is cited, which the author doubtless knew was attributed to David, it is cited simply as the testimony of a "certain one." Thus the human authorship of the Old Testament practically drops out of sight. The only real author is God. But this idea of the complete passivity of the human agent through whom God speaks is Greek.

Again, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was an allegorist, and this style of interpretation goes back to the Greeks. Jews of the Dispersion made use of it in the second century before our era, and the writer of Hebrews may have had no knowledge of the fact that it *was* Greek in its origin. That, however, is immaterial. He was an allegorist, and how profoundly this fact has modified his conception of Christian truth we shall now see. We notice first his explanation of a passage in Ps. 95. The author of that psalm called upon his contemporaries to hearken to God's voice, and warned them against unbelief by reminding them of its sorrowful consequences in the case of the generation who came out of Egypt (3:7—4:13). They did not enter into God's "rest," but their bodies fell in the wilderness. Moreover, the succeeding generation whom Joshua led into Canaan were nevertheless not partakers of God's rest, for in that case the Psalmist would not have been inspired to speak of "another day." The thought is that if he, centuries after the time of Joshua, was instructed to say,

To-day if ye shall hear his voice,  
Harden not your hearts,

it follows that the "rest" of God was not entered upon by those who passed over Jordan with Joshua. There are here two points to be

noticed. The writer sees in the simple "to-day" of the Psalmist a designation of the present age, the entire period from the day when he wrote down to the second coming of Christ (9:28). But this is to take the word allegorically. There the word "rest" is also allegorized. In the thought of the psalmist it was the inheritance in Canaan (Deut. 12:9). This land that flowed with milk and honey was regarded as God's rest to the people after the long hard experiences in the wilderness and in Egypt. But the word has a new meaning in our epistle. It is no longer Canaan and an earthly rest, but it is the "Sabbath rest" beyond the grave (4:9-10). This is indeed the crown of God's gifts of rest to his people, but it did not come within the Psalmist's horizon in the passage which we are considering.

The next instance of allegory is the author's treatment of Melchizedek (5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1-3). This is by far the most notable New Testament illustration of allegorical interpretation. It is true, the author seemed to have a starting-point for his thought in the mysterious language of Ps. 110, where we read:

Thou art a priest forever  
After the order of Melchizedek.

This statement invited an imaginative reader to seek to discover what that "order of Melchizedek" was. But recent Old Testament scholars regard the word "Melchizedek" as a gloss, as perhaps a marginal illustration of what the text was supposed to mean, and they translate: "Thou art a priest forever for my sake." The simple thought of the passage then is that the person who was addressed, perhaps Simon who was high priest in 141 B.C., was established in his office for life, and that this was in a peculiar sense *God's appointment*, for Simon was not of the priestly order. We may suppose that the case of Melchizedek was set in the margin as an illustration, for he is called in Scripture a priest of God (Gen. 14:18-20), though he lived long before the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood and was not a Hebrew. Then this gloss, as was often the case, crept into the received text of the psalm. Accordingly, this mysterious "order of Melchizedek" disappears from the psalm, as not in the original text. But the author of Hebrews took the gloss as authentic, and the verse furnished a convenient support for an allegorical interpretation of the reverend and mysterious figure of the king of Salem

who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.

Turning now to the author's use of the passage in Genesis, we notice two significant points. First, he found a deep meaning in the etymology of the name Melchizedek, and also in that of the name of the town over which Melchizedek was king. The first name justified him in thinking of this ancient priest as king of righteousness, and the second justified him in the thought that he was also a king of peace.

The story in Genesis, as might be expected, gives no very good warrant for this picture of Melchizedek, for it simply represents him as approving of Abraham's exploit against Chedorlaomer and the allied Kings. It does not suggest that he was pre-eminent in righteousness and worthy to stand as a model for far distant ages. Of course there is no occasion at all in the nature of things why Melchizedek should be put down as a king of peace because he ruled over "Salem," which word means peace, or why he should be held to have been a king of righteousness because his parents gave him the name "Melchizedek," which word has that meaning. But such treatment of proper names was very common in Philo, and it is properly reckoned as belonging to allegorical interpretation. The extreme felicity of the application of these names to Christ does not lend any support whatever to the author's treatment of the passage.

The last instance to be considered under this head of allegorical interpretation is that of the word "pilgrim" or "sojourner." It is said that Abraham became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, and from the word "sojourner" it is inferred that he looked for "the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:9-10). Again, the author says, with apparent reference to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, that they were self-confessed "pilgrims and strangers on the earth," and he concludes that they were "seeking a country of their own," that is, a heavenly one (11:13-16).

Now, according to the Old Testament, Abraham was indeed a sojourner in Canaan, as in a land not his own, though he did at length acquire the field of Machpelah as a burial-place; but he was a sojourner and stranger simply in contrast to being in possession of

the promised land of Canaan (Gen. 23:4). The Lord said to Moses regarding the descendants of Abraham, "I have established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned (Exod. 6:4). This was the land of promise, and, as far as the ancient story goes, the *only* land which the patriarchs or their descendants contemplated. When the psalmist said unto the Lord,

I am a stranger with thee,  
A sojourner, as all my fathers were (39:12),

he expressed his sense of the transitoriness of his earthly life. It is a going hither and yon, a coming forth as a shadow that tarries not. His words are a plaint on the sad limitations of earthly life.

The author of Hebrews, having himself a Christian hope of the consummation of life in the city of God and in a heavenly country, quietly ascribed the same hope to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He ignored the historical sense of the passages which speak of Abraham and others as pilgrims and sojourners, and gave to them instead an allegorical significance. This was solely an error of judgment as related to the problem of interpreting the Scriptures.

These then, as it seems to me, are the Greek elements in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Its conception of Christ is wholly interpenetrated with the widely current views of the Logos, its conception of a heavenly tabernacle of which the Mosaic was only a copy and shadow is based on the Platonic doctrine of Ideas, and its conception of Scripture is Greek in the underlying view of inspiration, Greek in that Christ is sometimes represented as speaking in the Old Testament—for this view probably sprang out of the Logos influence—and Greek in its profoundly allegorical character.